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# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 74

### Language and the study of diversity

by

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## **Language and the study of diversity**

Jan Blommaert

### **Introduction**

Language is one of the most immediate and sensitive indexes of diversity. Small differences in accent and speaking patterns betray someone's regional, social class, ethnic and/or gender backgrounds; hearing a different language spoken instantly provokes impressions of 'foreignness'; and seeing public signs in a language you don't read is a reliable indication that you're not in your familiar habitat. Language is also the most immediate and sensitive index of social change. Hearing or seeing languages not hitherto heard or seen in an area is sure and immediate sign that the area has changed – "hey, I never heard Russian spoken here!" And language, finally, is also the key tool to organize and navigate diversity: we perpetually adjust our language repertoires to those we have to communicate with, often coming up with entirely new forms of language usage. A failure to do so would lead to something most people consciously try to avoid – misunderstanding – or can be an effect of restrictive institutional arrangements in the area of language use – as when language legislation prescribes the use of a single language and/or script. In the latter case, language also becomes a sensitive index of conflicts, contests and power in a field of diversity.

In the study of language in society – an area covered by sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology and adjacent sciences – we like to believe that attention to the small details of language usage offers a privileged entrance into broader and less immediate social, cultural and political patterns. Spelling out the pedigree of this belief might be beyond the scope of the present essay (but see e.g. Voloshinov 1973; Bourdieu 1990; Agha 2007a). What is more useful perhaps is to try and provide substance to the belief, and discuss elements of the

contemporary study of language and society that can contribute to a wider program of diversity studies (cf Blommaert & Rampton 2011).

The direction I shall take in this exercise is to highlight three connected sets of relatively recent significant developments in our field of study. The first one is the move from language and languages to infra-language variation, and its effects on theory and analysis. The second one is the shift in the notion of 'speaker', which has effects on notions of 'competence' and 'groupness' or 'community'. And the third development, finally, is the renewed study of societal and institutional responses to diversity. The discussion of the first development is most fundamental and will take more space than that of the others.

### **From language to repertoire**

The study of language used to be, for a very long time, precisely that: the study of '(a) Language' – of things that have a name such as English, Bulgarian or Swahili. It fell to linguistics to determine the precise features of such Languages (the capital L signals this particular usage of the term); and to sociolinguistics to describe the relationships and contact points between such Languages (Agha 2007b; Makoni & Pennycook 2007). A term such as 'multilingualism' instantiates this hegemony: it is the co-occurrence of various Languages in the same social arena. For decades, societal diversity was sociolinguistically captured under the term 'multilingualism', and the number of Languages countable in an area was an indicator of its level of sociocultural diversity.

The co-occurrence of several Languages in one space has interesting effects. Codeswitching is one of them: people using elements from different Languages mixed in one utterance or speech event, a sure sign of societal multilingualism and of multilingual competences among speakers. Codeswitching would be studied as an exceptional, special phenomenon, challenging a widespread assumption of 'natural' monolingualism both at an individual and a societal level. A normal person speaks one Language, so people mixing several such Languages are, at least, strange and worthy of linguistic and sociolinguistic attention (so it

was thought), for such Languages must fight battles in the minds of their confused speakers (hence the title of a classic in this field: *Duelling Languages*, Myers-Scotton 1993).

Careful ethnographic study of codeswitching, however, led to different results. First, the use of a 'mixed' code was not premised by individual multilingual competence. All over the world, people fluently blend English with local languages, without being capable of having an extended English-only conversation. The mixed language, in other words, is very often the *only* Language spoken by people. Second, meaning effects appear not to depend just on the mix of *Languages* but also on all kinds of other features of speech: genre, style, topic. Talking about, say, business management often triggers frequent use of English terminology in many places in the world, while talking about bicycles or birds in such places rarely provokes such mixed speech. So in order to understand what people actually achieve through codeswitching, the distinction between Languages is rarely the most salient aspect of the issue. And third, 'mixed' speech appears to be subject to precisely the same sociolinguistic variation as speech in 'one' Language. Regional and social accents, dialects, registers and so forth all occur within codeswitching as well (Auer 1998 provides an overview).

Evidently, facts of infra-Language variation were long known; in fact, dialectology can be seen as one of the sources from which contemporary sociolinguistics emerged. Historical Linguistics had long established the fact that every contemporary Language is historically 'mixed'. Literary and Folklore studies along with Rhetoric had long before emphasized the importance of genres, styles and registers. And Dell Hymes had provided a synthetic framework for the ethnographic study of speech attending to precisely such infra-Language variation (Hymes 1972, 1996). But the confrontation with extraordinary 'messy' data, from the mid-1990s onwards, began to trigger innovative and integrative views (e.g. Rampton 1995). The 'messy' data, often taken from what we now call globalized or superdiverse contexts, defied the clarity offered by 'Languages', as well as several foundational assumptions in (socio)linguistics. What to do, for

instance, with forms such as “w84mCU@4” (wait for me, see you at 4) widely used in various forms of mobile texting and online chatting? Using standard tools of inquiry inevitably led to crippled analysis, and scholars developed more adequate theoretical and methodological instruments (see e.g. Rampton 2006; Pennycook 2007; Blommaert 2010, 2013b).

The general theoretical orientation emerging from this wave of efforts can be summarized as follows (for surveys, see Blommaert & Rampton 2011; Agha 2007a).

1. People do not use ‘Languages’, they use *resources* for communication, driven by concerns of *effect*, and deployed in practices of *linguaging* (‘doing’ language).
2. Specific sets of such resources are *language-ideologically* associated with a Language such as ‘English’ or ‘Russian’. The Languages we know are therefore not objective units but ideological ones: we say that we write in ‘English’ because of the widespread association of specific features with ‘English’ (rather than, say, ‘Russian’).
3. The effects brought about by deploying specific resources are *indexical*: the specific ordering of resources into recognizable registers, genres and styles triggers powerful standard sociocultural interpretations operating alongside better-known ‘linguistic’ interpretations. Such forms of order are often labeled ‘norms’ or ‘speech conventions’, and every meaningful form of communication will be grounded in conventionalized (hence recognizable as meaningful) ordered patterns of deployed resources.
4. The collective resources available to anyone at any point in time are a *repertoire*; repertoires are biographically emerging complexes of indexically ordered, and therefore functionally organized, resources. Repertoires include *every* resources used in communication – linguistic ones, semiotic ones, sociocultural ones.

In this new view, Languages are ideological constructs but relevant ones, as we shall see below. It is not because Languages ‘do not exist’ that the belief in their

existence cannot have powerful effects. Analytically, though, these views take us into another orbit, enabling far more precise and detailed analyses of what people effectively do with their language (the lower case 'l' stands for the real sociolinguistic object here). We can now 'enter into' Languages and find often extraordinarily complex and salient differences there.

We can, for instance, now determine that social trajectories of people are determined not just by access to a Language ("immigrants should learn English!"), but by access to highly *specific bits of language* such as standard orthographic literacy, control over advanced professional jargons, specific accents and so forth. And investigating the distribution of such specific resources quickly reveals a vast world of diversity *within* what used to be seen as one single 'speech community' (Rampton 1998; Blommaert 2008, 2013a applies this insight to literacy; more on this below). We also know that, given the normative aspect of communication, such forms of diversity are not neutral and equivalent but *stratified* and *unequal*. Not using the right accent or jargon in a conversation can lead to heavy sanctions, even when the Language is shared; a non-native accent or speaking style, for instance, can negatively affect crucial communicative events such as police or job interviews (Gumperz 1982; Roberts 2013). The *linguistic* diversity within a conventionally defined Language is mirrored in its *sociolinguistic* diversity, which in turn is a precipitate of the real *sociocultural* diversity that generated the repertoires of speakers.

Seemingly innocuous details of language usage so lead us straight to wider sociocultural patterns and relationships outside of language. Changes in such details – think of, e.g., a non-prestigious accent deployed by a newsreader on TV – can point towards changes in hard and soft hierarchies 'out there'.

### **The speaker and the community**

Evidently, in the view outlined above, few people indeed would be qualified as 'monolingual', since our repertoires invariably contain complexes of resources that are in terms of social and meaning effects often as different as 'Languages'.

We know how to talk to our colleagues and we know how to talk to our loved ones; we also know that both ways of speaking should never be confused in either direction; when they are, such transgression may come with a severe social penalty. We all *have to* have widely different registers, genres and styles in our repertoires, because social life is not unified, static or homogeneous.

Equally evident is the fact that no single person could ever be qualified as the 'perfect' speaker of anything. There is not a single speaker of 'English', for instance, who could claim to possess all the resources contained under that label. Our repertoires are in reality always 'truncated', with fairly well developed parts next to poorly developed ones, and with new ones entering while obsolete ones vanish (Blommaert & Backus 2013). We are at any point of time always 'experts' of language as well as 'apprentices', depending on the specific forms of language we need to use. This, too, is an effect of the heterogeneity of social life.

Both insights sound pedestrian, and they truisms to anyone who has had a long and hard look at the realities of actual language usage. But it is good to remember that they both disturb very deep-seated assumptions of traditional Linguistics: the Chomskyan image of the perfect speaker who can generate every possible sentence in his/her Language; and the Saussurean and Bloomfieldian idea of stable and homogeneous 'speech communities' into which such perfect speakers got socialized and in which people shared a maximum of rules and norms of language usage (Silverstein 1998; Rampton 1998; Agha 2007a). Such assumptions are institutionally entrenched in language learning and testing systems based on levels or degrees of 'knowledge' of language; they also underlie widespread discourses of 'integration' as we shall see shortly.

Globalization and superdiversity effects have had a major impact on the development of the views described above. Given the fantastic spread of various forms of 'English' around the on- and offline world, for instance, how can we determine the 'speech community' of 'English speakers'? And when does one qualify as a 'speaker' of English? Is 'English' still one Language or not? And what to think of new global cultures such as those gathering around HipHop or



Reggae? Or members of Mass Online Games communities, sometimes numbering millions, sharing the games' jargon? Or spectators of The Simpsons, scattered over the planet and picking up oneliners from such programs?

Obviously, globalization has caused the emergence of entirely new forms of communities and forced us to think about the connections between language, individuals and collectives. We can summarize the main insights from this exercise.

1. Speech communities emerge whenever people recognize each other's deployed communicative resources as meaningful. Shared indexical orders are the key to speech communities: shared specific and functionally organized sets of resources (registers, genres, styles) explain why people can understand each other in spite of otherwise massive differences in Language, social background, age and so forth.
2. Consequently, there are more speech communities than there are speakers, because all of us are at any time included in a very broad range of speech communities: at home, among friends, in the neighborhood, hobby clubs, professional environments, administrative contexts, as media audiences and so forth. Since our lives are characterized by several forms of mobility, we continuously move in and out of old and new communities. For each of their social arenas, we have acquired specific ordered resources: registers, genres, styles.
3. We occupy different positions in these different social arenas: we are 'old' and 'expert' members of our families but can be 'young' and 'apprentice' members of professional communities, hobby groups and so forth. Memberships, and degrees of membership, are determined by degrees of 'enregisterment': the degree to which we have learned and acquired specific complexes of resources valid in and defining such communities.
4. The different communities we are members of are not of the same order, they are *scalar*. A small-scale community such as the family will demand a different set of resources than, say, a global Mass Online Gaming community in which we spend an hour per day. We are at all times

members of communities at various scale-levels, some very palpable – our families, our neighborhoods, our job environments – others less tangible in everyday life – the administrative and police worlds in which we live; the nation-state; ethnic, age, gender, consumer and social class communities; the ‘international community’ into which we can be corralled at times. Here, we see how all of us belong simultaneously to tightly organized, fully integrated, enduring and dense communities as well as in loosely integrated, flexible and temporary communities.

5. We deploy certain resources only at certain scale-levels. A non-Anglophone academic, for instance, will switch into English as soon as s/he enters the scale of global academic communication, and switch back as soon as this arena is left. Mobility in a globalized world is predicated on the capacity to acquire and deploy resources needed to cross from one scale level (say, the local) to another (say, the global).
6. The continuous presence and availability of multiple and scalar communities ensures that everyone’s real social environment is at all times *polycentric*: we always operate in complex and potentially multi-scale situations, in which a perfectly appropriate intimate utterance to one’s wife can be understood as an obscenity by overhearing audiences. Similarly: an accent in English that sounds highly educated at home in Nairobi can be turned into a stigmatized immigrant accent in New York. Mobility in the age of globalization involves movements across scales, i.e. across complexes of norms, expectations and judgments. Online environments of course complicate such forms of scale-crossing.

Obviously, memberships in speech communities are always plural, stratified, selective and dynamic. ‘Full’ membership will be rare, while most forms of membership will be ‘by degree’. As said earlier: linguistic, sociolinguistic and sociocultural diversity are all part of one social system, and the complexity of one will be mirrored in the complexity of the other. Each of us is therefore not just ‘multilingual’, but also ‘multicultural’ – to adopt an older terminology – and one begins to get a glimpse of the highly problematic character of notions such as

‘identity’ and ‘authenticity’ these days (cf. Rampton 1995; Johnstone 1999; Jacquemet 2005; Wang 2013).

### **Institutional responses**

The latter statement is not how governments and authorities usually perceive things. It is a striking phenomenon: while sociolinguists detect layer upon layer of diversity, institutional approaches to language in society appear to move back to the most rigorous denials of such diversity. In this move, we see several things (Silverstein 1996; Schieffelin et al 1998; Kroskrity 2000; Hogan-Brun et al 2009; Spotti & Detailleur 2011):

1. People and societies are seen as ‘naturally’ monolingual; they were born as speakers of one ‘pure’ Language; being multilingual is seen as an obstacle to social mobility and ‘normal’ identity development, unless the multilingualism includes prestigious Languages such as English.
2. The nation-state is the defining scale-level in institutional responses to diversity. There is an immense emphasis on knowledge of the ‘standard’ variety of the ‘national Language’ in connection to popular and institutional conceptions of citizenship.
3. It is assumed that particular levels of language proficiency are conclusive in determining someone’s identity and social future.

Language testing has in a great number of countries become one of the central instruments in regulating immigration. The identity of refugees is investigated by means of a proficiency test in the ‘native’ Language of the applicant, and this Language needs to be in some way situated in the country of origin claimed by the applicant. An imagery of fully integrated nation-states shines through, in which every citizen has access to relevant national emblems such as ‘standard’ national language varieties; evidently this image goes with an assumption of stability, in which countries of origin of refugees have never experienced war, rebellion, famine, repression and migration. We see old, Modernist language ideologies being deployed here in contexts where none of their assumptions has

much empirical purchase. The effect is often disastrous for the applicant (cf Maryns 2006).

Similar testing regimes are frequently used in 'integration' policies designed for new immigrants. Access to certain important social benefits – official registration, social housing, welfare and education – is made conditional on immigrants taking courses in the 'standard' national Language variety and getting a certificate of language proficiency. Achievement of immigrant learners in schools is equally increasingly measured by means of standard testing tools in the national Language.

The inadequacies of such notions of language in superdiverse societies have repeatedly been emphasized (e.g. Shohamy 2001; Language and National origin Group 2004; Eades 2010). Given our earlier remarks, the case ought to be clear too: apart from the ideological character of the 'standard' Language (who actually *speaks* the standard variety?) and the fallacy of linear models of language learning, it should be clear that the real repertoires of people never just point towards 'national' origins: they point towards an entire life, spent in various places (surely in the case of refugees) and social arenas (Blommaert 2009). Every such social arena was, and is, a learning environment in which highly specific and selected resources are made available. Consequently, somebody who grew up in a refugee camp, far from school, may be proficient in spoken vernacular varieties of the 'national' Language, but not in its 'standard' and written varieties (typically acquired at school). Likewise, a prolonged stop at one of the places in a refugee's itinerary may result in, say, a general touch of Italian accent in any Language spoken – certainly when that stop involved exposure to education and media environments. In general, the Modernist imagination of Language prevents attention to what really matters: the details of language usage, revealing the different shades and formats of people's social being in a range of contexts (Maryns 2006).

### **Conclusion: language and rapid social change**

We begin to see how the contemporary study of language in society can become a highly developed tool for investigating rapid social change. The ‘submolecular’ gaze on language usage has created a panorama of differences, all relevant and all related to features of social environments. Changes in such environments will very rapidly convert in sociolinguistic changes – and the latter often stimulate or consolidate the former. Specific sociolinguistic techniques such as Linguistic Landscaping are particularly useful for monitoring rapid and unpredictable changes in social arenas, with a clear potential for interdisciplinary application (cf. Blommaert 2013b).

The shift in the study of language in society, documented in this essay, can be summarized as a shift from multiplicity to complexity (Arnaut 2013). Rather than as juxtapositions of separate Languages, sociolinguistic diversity is now seen as a complex system subject to very different and separately developing forces, with multiple historicities and scales entering in uniquely situated communicative events, and with relatively unpredictable directions of development. A more systematic and disciplined attention to diversity has, thus, shaken the robust structuralist foundations of this science. But it has made its object – language in society – vastly more attractive and relevant in the study of diversity at large.

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